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American Soldiers in French Universities

C. ALFRED CAMPBELL, '20.

The American Army, during the difficult period which followed the Armistice, tried an interesting educational experiment. The soldier was sent to school. The original plan was formulated by the Y. M. C. A. and it was put into execution by the Army Educational Commission, appointed by the General Staff. An American Junior College was established at Beaune, Cote d'Or, where about six thousand students were in attendance. The instructional staff was selected from members of the A. E. F. who were qualified for this work by reason of previous experience. The courses given correspond very closely to those given in American institutions. Approximately the same number of students also attended the regular universities. It is the purpose of this article to discuss the part of the plan which concerned those men of college grade who were sent to French universities. These men were carefully chosen and represented some of the best men in the entire A. E. F. They ranged from mature graduate students, some having the doctor's degree, and a certain number ranking as high as colonel, to younger college students, both officers and privates. At each school where Americans were in attendance a military detachment was formed, having a commanding officer, in charge of discipline and administration, and a dean in charge of instruction. Matters of attendance and class discipline were not incumbent upon the professor but were taken care of by a monitor, usually the ranking officer in the class, who reported to the commanding officer: The largest detachment, nearly two thousand, was in Paris, but all the universities, except Lille, Alger and Strasbourg had their contingents. The English and Scottish universities were able to receive rather less than Paris alone, but those included in this allotment were reported to have done profitable work. The men remained four months, from March 1st to July 1st. It is a matter of interest to inquire into the real educational value of this experiment.

The students came from every walk of life and had every conceivable interest. A small minority was anxious, mainly, to escape from the daily grind of army life. They wanted to have more freedom and to amuse themselves. Probably this minority was smaller than the same type seen in every American university. The war sobered young men and those who presented themselves for study gave every appearance of seriousness, as evidenced by their attitude and their actual work. The opinion has been expressed that with the bar of a foreign language and with the handicap of an improvised course, the stay

of our students was only four pleasant months spent in a college atmosphere without genuine academic profit. Such a view is erroneous. While men studied under certain obvious difficulties such as ignorance of French and the necessity of entering a totally different academic atmosphere from what they were accustomed to, the results were a magnificent justification of the generous opportunity offered by the army and placed under the direction of Dr. John Erskine of Columbia University. It is extremely difficult to sum up what it all finally meant, because so much of what was attained was educational indeed, but extramural, and because the work of the different universities was necessarily of varying value. Discipline was everywhere practically perfect and there was a minimum of disorderly conduct and living, especially in the quiet provinces. A great deal more profit was naturally gained in a place like Bordeaux where Professor Armstrong of Princeton, with his knowledge of both French and American conditions, was able to place the men where they belonged, look after them and stimulate their attention in ways familiar to us, than in smaller institutions where there was in charge an officer unfamiliar with education and where the students merely followed lectures in the regular course and took extra French classes. Again the stimulus of the celebrated Professors of Paris was a marked influence on our students. These were individuals who profited enormously. An American doctor in Toulouse, for example, with the laboratories and assistants of the university to aid him and a vast amount of hospital material at his disposal, developed a method of closing wounds which had in some cases remained open for over a year. On the other hand, there were many doctors in Paris who had hoped to obtain highly specialized graduate work in their particular lines and who were totally disappointed.

The American, whatever his education, and unfortunately, from the French standpoint, our education is indefinite and rather slipshod, is behind no race in energy, resourcefulness and adaptability. He showed these qualities in his situation. The students were intensely interested in the life which they found around them. Quite different from the average "doughboy," enclosed in the rigid army system, the men made their rare chance worth while. They took

The writer is indebted to Professor Stephen H. Bush of the Romance Language Department of the State University of Iowa, former Dean of The Sorbonne University Detachment, for a large part of the information contained herein.

the opportunity of three-day leaves and traveled all over France in an eager spirit of intelligent curiosity. They developed athletic, journalistic, theatrical and social life in their detachments and in the towns where they were. They raised large sums of money for good causes to show their gratitude to the French. A scholarship of a thousand dollars for one year was given to a French student in each of the fourteen universities where Americans were in attendance, to be used for study in America. At Toulouse, law students carefully edited their notes and published them in French and English for the use of the whole class. The men entered into the life of the communities, in which they found themselves, in the most intelligent way. Nowhere were there difficulties with the population or the authorities. Innumerable friendships and many marriages resulted. In Paris large numbers made applications to stay overtime to finish special courses. Elsewhere many wished to remain for summer work. Nine out of ten testified to the students' committee that they considered their study a success.

With all this evidence, which could be largely extended, that the men were actively interested, it is still necessary to consider specifically the educational value of the army plan. In the first place the student body gained a practical and literary knowledge of French. Immersed as they were in the French atmosphere, living as most of the students did in good French homes, listening to three or even four sixty-minute lectures a day, they could scarcely escape learning the language. Everything about them spoke of French history, art, politics. At the end practically every one could follow intelligently a lecture in French and carry on with more or less fluency a conversation. Many made phenomenal progress. One professor stated that nearly every student in his university was regularly taking notes on the lectures in the month of May. In America we can scarcely hope to teach as much French in several years of class work as was easily acquired in four months by the soldier-students. This judgment is not based merely on the evidence cited above but upon the statement of Professor Stephen H. Bush, Dean of the Sorbonne Detachment. This judgment was formed from many visits to classes, from written reports made by the monitors of all the classes at the Alliance Francaise, comprising nearly a thousand students, and from a class which he gave at the Sorbonne.

Apart from the question of pure language, there was much lost of the first days and even weeks of instruction. Nevertheless much was done to forestall the difficulty. Interpreters were used in many classes. Much work was given, especially in Paris, in the English language. Professor Fernbach of the Pasteur Institute, for instance, gave a well appreciated course

in biological chemistry (really a course in ferments) to a large class, using English entirely. Summaries were printed for all the nine special courses in the faculty in Letters in Paris. In all the faculties there, the special courses met twice a week for lectures which were supplemented by a third hour in English for discussion of what had been already treated. In the provinces where fewer students could understand the language at the start, a month was given largely to a concentrated course in French for all who needed it. In Paris over half of the students carried a course in French, usually in conjunction with other work.

The series of special courses offered by the Sorbonne (Paris) under the title "French Civilization" and largely duplicated by the other universities, proved to be of the highest interest. It is worth noting that the Sorbonne has just announced that this unique series will be continued as a regular part of the curriculum, although intended, above all, for foreigners. These courses were as follows: "History of the French Language," Brunot; "History of France," Guignebert; "Old French Literature," Chamard; "Classical French Literature," Reynier; "Modern French Literature," Michaut; "Geography of France," Herbette; "Modern Ideas," Bougle; "Modern European Politics," Denys; "History of French Art," Lemonnier. The summaries of these courses, varying from thirty to sixty pages weekly, were in the hands of all the students. Examinations, given in April and June, as well as resumes, called for three times during the term, showed that the instructions were intelligently followed. Reading was done in the Sorbonne Library where there was an average attendance of forty students daily and six hundred and forty books were taken out during May and June. Naturally not nearly so much outside study was done as in American institutions where daily assignments were made and reading supervised with care. Beside taking such work the men spread through the entire university and its allied schools and could be seen attending lectures in every imaginable subject.

Courses in science correspond to those in letters. Laboratory work supplemented the lectures. When students could work under such instructors as Professor Fernbach, Professor Caullery and Madam Curie, not to mention others, their interests were well served. The students in Science and Engineering occasionally objected to the stress laid by the French on the theoretical side of the subjects. It is worth noting, however, that in a special advanced course in wireless telegraphy given to a group of chosen men from the Aviation Section and Signal Corps, few of the Americans were quite up to the standard of the course, owing to their weakness in advanced physics

and mathematics. Indeed it is doubtful whether any were able to grasp all that the course involved.

The law course in Paris was of particular interest. It was taken by a hundred and eighty-nine mature men, most of them practicing lawyers in civil life. Thirty of them altogether took thirty regular courses in addition to those arranged for Americans. Two men passed the examinations for two complete years of French law. One article was written for the French Law Review. The law faculties in France are everywhere strong and in all the universities the Americans were impressed by the character of their instruction. In Paris the men were captivated, especially by Professors May, Berthelemy and Geouggre de Lapradelle, the latter advisor of the French government and formerly exchange professor at Columbia. In one course living questions were brought directly from the Peace Conference into the classroom. One monitor remarked that the work of one of these instructors was so remarkable that it was the saying of the class that they would take work with that man in any subject and any language. The men stayed as a body to the end, passed the examinations exceedingly well and were practically never absent even when Metro strikes obliged many of them to walk three miles to class. What was remarked by the students was the integrity, the eager interest and the high intellectual quality of their professors. As the head monitor wrote, "Each one of us will return to the United States in a better condition to resume his work, a better citizen on account of broader vision, a better friend of France and the French People."

About two hundred men were enrolled in different business and social science schools of university ranking. The work was sometimes inappropriate to American needs, but all of it was suggestive and some of the courses were of high grade and even unobtainable elsewhere. One older man wrote of a certain course that if what was said there could have been appreciated in America, the egregious mistakes which he had himself seen American business men make in the Orient would have been avoided. At the Ecole des Hautes Sociales, Professor Nogaro of Caen gave a course in Money and Exchange which is regarded by the authorities of the school itself as presenting a new and original view of this important subject.

Students of engineering who were not masters of the French language were rather disappointed because the advanced technical schools were not as lenient in this regard as the Faculty of Letters and Science. No students were enrolled for actual engineering studies except those who had a working knowledge of the language. A great number of engineering students who were not qualified for work in the strictly technical schools, enrolled for special work in mathematics, mechanics, physics, chemistry, elec-

tricity and aerodynamics under the Faculty of Science. Nearly fifty engineers, who were thus qualified, were distributed in the Ecole Polytechnique, the Ecole des Mines and the Ecole des Travaux Publics. The criticism was sometimes made that the work was too theoretical, but most of it interested the men professionally to such an extent that they stayed to the end, finished their "projects" and applied almost in a body to remain after July 1st to finish. In some subjects the French who are beyond any doubt superior builders, have engineering work to show which cannot be duplicated in America. The students were quick to seize upon such chances.

Music and art, as was to be expected, attracted many advanced students who profited by the unrivalled opportunities which the city of Paris offers along such lines.

An exception to the general satisfaction expressed by Americans is found in the medical work. There were nearly a hundred and fifty doctors in Paris. They were older than the rest, mature men, a large number colonels and majors who were already specialists. Most of them were weak in French. They came for strictly postgraduate work. Paris is at present poorly organized for such a purpose. The graduates are not separated from the younger students in the clinics and co-ordination between the different clinics is wanting. This condition is recognized by the French and plans are on foot for a reorganization of medical instruction. As a whole the Americans were dissatisfied with the work in medicine.

In comparing the instruction in Paris and elsewhere it is clear that some of the universities were not equipped at all to handle the advanced students in all the lines of study desired. Laboratories were often small and poor. Subjects were often demanded in which the instruction was either poor or altogether lacking. On the other hand there are found outside of the capital many young ambitious men who are to be the professors of tomorrow in the university of Paris. At the same time one finds inevitably in Paris a good many professors of yesterday who have made a reputation in past years and whose work is no longer valuable today. The atmosphere of quiet study of a provincial university makes it an ideal place for all but the very advanced student. It is easier to get into close touch with the real French people and the professors are able to give more individual time and interest to their students than the wellknown and intensely occupied professors of Paris.

It was clear that the interest and enthusiasm of our students were the natural results of certain inherent French qualities displayed at their best in the university instructor. The French professor is a genuine intellectual. He presents his subject with a serious-

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ness and integrity necessarily impressive. He is not only a master of his subject, but also a master of the art of lecturing. Each lecture is a finished piece which stands out in the mind as a whole which can be remembered also without an effort. There is no slipshod instruction permitted, no presentation of a mass of confused and uncoordinated facts. The exposition of a different point of view from our own in this clearcut manner stimulated our students. They felt the broadening effect of such work and returned to America better educated men.

Before the war the French universities were rather inhospitable to Americans. They found themselves in difficulties of red tape. They found it hard to find and register for the work which they came for. The professors did not understand them or the system of which they were the product. Today the American is known and liked. The French are anxious to furnish him with good university work and are well equipped to do so. The new course in French Civilization given in Paris by a group of the best professors is an excellent example. The administrations are ready to go half way to meet Americans and know what to do to help them to take advantage of what is found in each university. A National Office of French Universities and Schools (96 Boulevard Raspail, Paris) has been established for the purpose, among other things, of encouraging and assisting foreign students in France. This office gladly furnishes information concerning courses of instructions, degrees granted, cost of living, tuition, etc., upon request. With their sense of order and precision, their love of clearness, their instinct for all that is artistic, their high intellectual gifts, added to their present understanding of Americans, the French professors have something to give the future American student in France. This much was clearly shown by the four months' experiment of last year. It is more than probable that out of it will grow much closer university relations wherein each country will profit by the advantage offered by the other.
